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Constrained Bodies:

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October 16, 1996

Holly J. Nichols, Chair
3rd Annual Symposium
Women's Studies Program
University of Rhode Island
Roosevelt Hall
Kingston, RI 02881

Dear Dr. Nichols,

I am writing to submit my proposal of my piece entitled "Constrained Bodies: Racism in Queer Theory," for your consideration for possible inclusion in your symposium on "Prospectives on Progress."

In this paper I am primarily concerned with ^{An examination of} how racist paradigms can and do limit the effectiveness of Queer Theory as a useful base for academic and activist thinking. If you have any questions or concerns feel free to contact me at the above address and/or phone number. You can also email me at gilgoe@sage.edu I look forward to hearing from you and in any case I support this symposium and applaud its important goals and effects.

Sincerely,

Dr. Ellen M. Gil-Gomez

Ellen M. Gil-Gomez
English Department
Russell Sage College
Troy, NY 12180

"Constrained Bodies: Racism in Queer Theory"

Queer Theory has had a short but important life in the field of literary studies. Because of its focus on the lives of Gay and Lesbian peoples--their narratives, their theories, the meaning of identity, the process of its formation and its connection with cultural production(s)--queer theory has challenged the production of literary canons, how and why we study literature, what we consider representative texts, traditional theories of gender and sexuality, and the role of popular and cultural studies within literary studies to name just a few. Arguably no one theory has done more for the field of Queer Theory than Judith Butler's Performance Theory. I suggest this is because she first develops the paradigms of Foucault, and also because her vision of sexuality and gender identity as free floating and under the control an agent is a liberating and empowering one

However, I find that the total disregard for the lives of lesbians of color is a major flaw in her argument and is furthermore reflective of the general lack of considerations of racial, ethnic, and class identities within the field. I believe Butler is so blinded because of the very nature of her theory; in other words, her lack of consideration of the historical and social contexts of identities forces her to consider, by default, the apparently "neutral" identity of whiteness. She therefore continues the racist act of imprinting white identity on the constrained bodies of women of color

In this paper I argue for the absolute necessity of considering the work of lesbians of color so that their writing, their theories, stand alongside those presently valorized by the academy. Lesbians of color have written many literary and theoretical texts (traditional and non traditional) delineating theories of identity that include race, gender, and context. These women have successfully "rewritten" their own cultures to

embrace their narratives of lesbian identity. Therefore, I agree with Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano's call for the reworking of categories within Lesbian and Gay studies in order to extricate it from a patriarchal, white supremacist framework. Ultimately, Queer Theory too must be reconceived if it is to truly affect the academic structure--by refusing hierarchy, white supremacy, and patriarchy--and have a more lasting effect than just as a fleeting attempt to be heard by the majority. I cannot downplay the importance of this issue in these "early days" when I consider the power that text can have on activists, communities, and society as a whole and, on the other hand, how much pain that these limits can have on many communities when they consider their own "Prospectives on Progress."